

Love at First Sight (Sort of)

Her name was *Florrie*, she was twenty-three and she came from Skipton, North Yorkshire. Although recently widowed, she hid her grief well and kept herself to herself. Apparently self-sufficient, she seemed to ask nothing from anyone and expected nothing back in return. She'd recently completed her first winter alone and had survived, although she looked a little the worse for wear. Her defining aura was one of silent resignation, but coupled with dignity.

Although she was powerless to control the forces that disturbed her settled existence, she seemed somehow to know she had a voice, and was prepared to use it if necessary. Most of all she looked lonely, in need of a fresh injection of the tender loving care that had once been lavished upon her. I'd like to say that for our part it was love at first sight, but it wasn't quite like that. In those early days it would have been more accurate to say that we'd fallen for the romance of it all, rather than the realities.

It had taken my wife Annette and me a half day's hard driving to reach our rendezvous point, during which the subject of the future had been most definitely off-limits. It was only after we'd parked the car that the ins and outs of what was being proposed began finally to sink in. The responsibilities, the need for constant attention, the personal consequences of a fresh commitment, and perhaps worst of all, in the event of things going wrong, the prospect of unending maintenance. All these things hit home with the suddenness of an unexpected fall, bringing with them the same sensation of surprise, coupled with a loss of confidence in one's ability to carry out even the most simple of tasks. The whole enterprise had suddenly become quite scary.

First introductions did not go well. The image that had dragged us halfway across the country had belonged to the very best of parish magazine tradition. A grainy faxed copy of a photograph had offered splodges of black and white with the

occasional defined line, through which it was just about possible to make out her basic profile. Our imaginations had filled in the gaps, and had done the job well enough to convince us the trip was worthwhile.

'Here she is,' Linda announced, with more than an ounce of pride as we walked down a newly laid towpath. Linda was *Florie's* guardian and advocate. We first saw her resting on a mooring post outside the boatyard's shop. Something about her, possibly her air of purpose combined with her sensible clothes and shoes, marked her out as the person we were there to meet. She looked every inch the Yorkshire farmer's wife, even though her husband had owned an engineering business.

With her introduction, our eyes rested on a graceful beauty, her bodywork an elegant shade of blue overlaid with what looked like recently applied varnish. Her tiller was decorated with a criss-cross of white, yellow and red stripes and her flanks sported elaborate designs that must have taken hours of work and patience to execute. We were impressed and checked our progress to admire the vision before us. Our imaginations hadn't done her justice.

Linda walked on.

'*Florie*,' she announced, with more than a touch of deeply embedded pride, sweeping her arm towards the next boat but one in a way that invited – nay, demanded – that we turn our eyes towards a rather forlorn and slightly world-weary vessel ten yards further on. Our elation was pricked, and began to deflate into a dim disappointment, barely enough to keep our expectations afloat. The sheer power of Linda's very clear need for us to share her sense of pride was difficult to resist however, so we dutifully caught her up.

Even her best friends would have been hard pushed to describe *Florie* as a beauty. Her front profile emphasised her high and pointed bow, a proboscis raised just ever so slightly too high, suggesting either aristocratic or ancient Roman genes. Her roof was distinctly pitted, not with pinholes, but with hacking great big dents, where people had jumped on her from on high without regard for the damage they might cause. Her hatches were as much rust as they were paint. The sign that carried her name had

been painted on wood. Although there was nothing wrong with the workmanship, the wood itself had been poorly treated and as a result had begun to rot. One more winter would be one too many.

The view from the back was hardly any more promising. No highly decorated tillerwork here, rather a simple elbow painted a deep scarlet red that merged into the muddy brown water. On her backside a dirty brown mark spilled down from the top of the diesel tank, demanding rapid action with a baby wipe, or failing that some Vm.

More with resolution than hope, we persevered, encouraged by Linda's transparent enthusiasm. It was clear that *Florie* had known love in her lifetime, so the best tactic seemed to be concentrating on finding her inner qualities. As we focused our thoughts, it also became clear that the day's activities had suddenly become deadly serious. We'd left fantasy land behind two hundred and fifty miles away; this was the real world. The question suddenly being asked of us was whether we were suitable contenders for *Florie's* affection or simply time-wasters? At that particular moment none of the parties involved knew the answer. We were under the spotlight as much as the boat.

As if to accentuate our sense of having become a centre of attention, we were joined by John, a man armed with a screw-driver. Tall, with well-chiselled features, he had an air about him of quiet competence and I found his apparent dispassionate air appealing. We were not in for a hard sell. After a cursory exchange of greetings he lifted the engine hatch and began probing, seemingly at random, inside *Florie's* nether regions. His brief was clearly to get her started and that was what he was going to do. The bedside manner he displayed was that of a gynaecologist of the old school, more barber-surgeon than *Peak Practice*. We got the impression that he'd prod around and wait for a yelp rather than wait to be told if something hurt.

'It would take a bloody bomb to stop one of these Listers,' he announced proudly, seemingly oblivious to the fact that stopping it wasn't the problem. The only reason he was there was because the thing had so far defied efforts to make her start, with a dead battery on the towpath offering damning evidence of failure. We

left him to it. As we did so, we were left with the acute feeling that there were now two pairs of eyes boring into us.

After some difficulty with keys, namely working out which opened which lock, something even Linda seemed unable to fathom, we entered the cabin and our spirits lifted a little. We could just make out some splendid wood panelling lining the walls, and a beautiful cast-iron solid fuel burner dominating one of the far corners, its coal-black chimney disappearing into the roof. Linda opened the curtains and the scene which daylight revealed had a certain *Marie Celeste* quality about it. Everything was where the previous owner, Linda's husband, had left it before he'd suffered his unexpected, and unfortunately fatal, heart attack. We instantly felt uncomfortable, as if we'd broken in and were contemplating the most valuable items to steal. Linda, however, was welcoming and generous in wanting to share everything with us, inviting us to look around, explaining things as she went.

Her generosity dried up when it came to answering our carefully prepared questions. In fact, it soon became clear that when it came to information, Linda was about as much use as a bacon butty at a bar mitzvah. She shouted towards the top of John's head, all that was visible as he tinkered away in the bowels of the engine, and invited him in. Seconds later he dutifully joined us, releasing a heartfelt sign of pleasure as he came down the steps into the galley, as if reliving an ancient and cherished memory. He was either a brilliant actor or we were on to something.

'Eee, they don't do 'em like this any more,' he announced, his face full of regret as he did so, but devoid of any embarrassment from the use of such a hackneyed expression. 'It's all Formica and cushioned flooring these days - to make turnaround easier of a Friday,' he explained. What he seemed to be suggesting was that *Florie* had character, something we found difficult to deny. Apparently standards these days were driven by the caravan trade, although comparisons with the annoying tin boxes which clogged up the motorways wasn't something calculated to warm me to boating. Everyone, Annette included, seemed surprised by my observation that I'd never set foot in a caravan, as if I'd casually commented that I'd never used an indoor toilet. It was perhaps just as well that I hadn't added my lifelong understanding that this

was something that would only ever be achieved over my dead body.

Immediate questions answered, John returned to the engine, perhaps embarrassed by his outward display of emotion, and we continued our tour. Just inside the hatch was an airing cupboard, adjacent to a boiler of a type that apparently they didn't make any more, mainly because the latest European directive banned them from being installed on new boats. Not encouraging. John assured us as he once more descended into the engine compartment outside, whilst displaying a confidence only a madman would doubt, that you could still get the parts. Beyond this was the kitchen or galley, a three-ringed cooker, a preparation area, cupboards and a fridge. The last apparently took a couple of hours to cool down after being switched on and had to be left empty when you left, otherwise a particularly virulent kind of mould would invade.

Already I was approaching information overload; we seemed to be entering a parallel universe with its own rules, second nature to the cognoscenti and designed to mark out the novice for ritual humiliation. The main living area was dominated by an L-shaped seat, which folded out into a double bed, whilst forward we found a set of bunks and the bathroom, bisected by a corridor and separated from the main area by their own door. Beyond that lay what I regarded as the foredeck, with removable wooden benches either side. I could just imagine our two boys, then aged six and eight, their life jackets catching the sun, sitting there and shouting warnings of oncoming shipping or low hanging branches to the feckless driver at the back.

I decided to leave the women to detailed discussions of the domestic arrangements and went to see if I could offer John some moral support at the back. Besides, my curiosity had now been rekindled and I had become keen to see *Florie* in action. I approached with caution. John's legs had disappeared and he seemed to be bent over in a position not seen since the heyday of East European gymnasts. Although impressive, the way he was maintaining his balance seemed precarious and unsustainable, and I stood perfectly still lest one had rocking motion relieved him of his manhood.

We struck up a conversation and it turned out that John was no simple grease monkey. In fact, he was the boatyard owner and it was he who had had *Florie* built in the first place. This explained his reaction a few minutes before. He'd subsequently hired her out to novices and professionals alike for the first fifteen years of her life before selling her on to the now recently departed Roy. His tone carried an undercurrent of 'even a blind idiot could drive one of these things' (and judging by some of the scratches and dents plenty had), which I wasn't sure I welcomed. Anyway, I remember thinking, this tone was a bit rich from someone who couldn't even get her to start.

Within seconds he resumed his role as provider of a torrent of information and I attempted to concentrate to take it all in. He stressed that the hull was solid and – important this – that the engine had been very well maintained. The latter fact was critical because successfully changing the inner tube on a bike was something I normally had to set aside half a day for. I wasn't what you'd call a natural when it came to anything that clicked, whirred or, in this case, chugged.

Her vital statistics were forty-four feet long and six feet eleven inches wide, narrow enough to give us the freedom of the canal network, but long enough to sleep and house four people. She needed a little attention (a little!), but John assured me this was mainly cosmetic, as he poked the screwdriver down ever deeper into the boat's workings. This was an area dominated by oil, pistons, camshafts, cylinder heads and other paraphernalia of a kind which tends to be fascinating to grandads or the kind of sad people who hang around railway restoration schemes.

Clearly I would have helped if only I'd remembered to bring some overalls with me – and if I'd known the first thing about engines. The only comfort I was drawing from his exertions was the complete lack of embarrassment he seemed to feel. He was either displaying his thespian side again or this sort of thing was perfectly normal. Suddenly even that small measure of comfort turned icy cold as I digested the implications of what constituted normal.

'There!' he announced in a raised voice coloured with just a hint of triumph, as the engine throbbed into life sending out thick

clouds of pungent, oil-burning smoke. 'It was the ignition that was the problem. Soon get that fixed.'

The noise that now surrounded us was a familiar one, reminiscent of a canal boat holiday fully sixteen years before. It sounded good, solid as the Bank of England, like a narrowboat's engine should sound. All of a sudden our dream had been kicked back into reality along with the engine, the vague notion that we had been staring a dud in the face, and therefore were going to have the decision made for us, having been snatched away.

The metal flooring was slid back into place over the engine hatch. Out of sight, out of mind, I thought, if not earshot. Standing over it I could feel its rhythmic chugging vibrate up from my feet, through my legs and into my belly. It was almost sensual. Almost, but not quite.

'Of course, the one drawback of these is the knees,' John yelled as he passed me the tiller. I nodded out of politeness and raised a thumb in acknowledgement. It was true that my knees were vibrating a little, but nothing to be too worried about. Perhaps the effect built up over time, I wondered. Maybe there was a condition known as narrowboatman's knee, a bit like housemaid's knee or tennis elbow. No, surely that couldn't be right.

'The what?' I shouted back, cupping a hand to one ear whilst keeping a firm grip on the tiller with the other.

'The boys,' he replied, pointing down into the now hidden engine compartment, as if this was some kind of term of endearment for the various bits of machinery which were now doing what they did best.

'A modern Jap job is much quieter, but I don't know, they just don't seem to sound right, and anyway, they need more work.' He sighed, grabbing the tiller from me and pushing it firmly, but with no little determination, in the direction opposite to the one I'd adopted. He managed this while at the same time wiping his nose on a disgusting, grime-encrusted rag.

The noise! That was what he'd been going on about. I was with him on that and in fact I didn't find it a problem. This was the soundtrack I'd been expecting; anything else would have been

a disappointment. Besides, everything's relative and there was no one else on the water we could compare ourselves against. It would do, I concluded. If this was the price for low maintenance, I'd pay it. Without leaving any instructions, he waltzed to the front of the boat and untied her ropes. The front began to swing out as he did the same at the stern before jumping back on board. The boat rocked alarmingly with his weight. We were free from the bank and ready to motor.

The steady vibration of the engine made conversation impossible and we were left alone with our thoughts. Perhaps belatedly, the question now buzzing round in my mind was simple. Did we really want to buy a boat? Was it, well, was it sensible? For the second time in two years I was on the verge of leaving a safe, well-paid job in favour of the uncertainty of self-employment. Perhaps we should have been conserving rather than possibly squandering our limited resources. An army of niggling safe options marched to the forefront of my consciousness and charged at the venter of confidence we'd carefully laid over our unspoken doubts.

And yet it was partly this very uncertainty that made the whole thing attractive, exciting, and even dangerous. This dream, of somewhere to escape to, a bolt hole from the nine to five, was the mirage we'd been chasing before being confronted by the sheer physicality of the boat itself and the intricacies of her unpredictable innards. In rapid succession, before we'd found out she wouldn't start, we'd been told how to get her warmed up, about the need for regular pump-outs, and the occasional requirement for backing her bottom. Memories of nappy changes and the frustrations of trying to get baby equipment to function as it is supposed to were all too recent and raw not to offer a prescience, as well as a warning, of what we might be letting ourselves in for.

Back in the real world, John was showing me how to engage the throttle and how to find reverse. As he did so I could almost feel some gold braid forming on the peak of my baseball hat. Space here was generous, in line with the cruiser style *Florie* had been designed to. There was enough room to set up a couple of garden chairs, with some high wooden benching-cum-safety rail curving round the stern, so there was somewhere to rest your backside on those steady slow stretches of strait. It didn't take too

great a leap of the imagination to see myself leaning on the tiller, beer bottle in hand (assuming the fridge had got working in time), Annette inside, reading as usual, and the boys keeping pace alongside on the towpath on their bikes.

After a hundred yards of cruising John brought the boat in while I leapt on the shore, rope in hand, and gently pulled the bow back parallel to the path. The engine slipped into idle and then, reluctantly, for it had only just got going again after its winter lay-up, died. A couple of final puts suggested a disappointment in being cut off in its prime. Our two-minute trial period was apparently over.

'Well, what do you think?' John asked, my ears still readjusting to the sudden silence. Linda's face looked up from the hatch, her clear expectation being that negotiation was also man's work. I felt the pressure beginning to build; Annette also seemed to be looking for me to take a lead. Before I had time to frame an answer the moment passed, as John filled the embarrassment of the silence by asking if I had any more questions.

I seized the moment to inject some uncertainty. Presenting my best poker face I suggested that although we liked what we had seen, there was clearly a need for Annette and I to have a chat on the way home. Anyone thinking we were going to make an instant decision could think again.

The situation was clearly a delicate one. For Linda the boat clearly held many memories and she had yet to remove her rose-tinted spectacles. For John, we guessed there was the small matter of a selling commission, notably whether he was in for one at all, seeing as Linda had made it clear that we were to deal with her direct when it came to any discussions about actual folding stuff. For us, there was a genuine need to talk, which was actually quite unusual. That's not to suggest that we never talk, the opposite in fact, merely that whenever we'd found ourselves in similar circumstances before, when we'd bought any of our houses for example, one of us had always ended up selling the virtues of the purchase to the other. In the past we had found this to be a remarkably effective way of testing pros and cons. This decision, however, was different; neither of us was sure which way to fall, and we knew each other well enough to sense it.

The exchange of concerns and plus points started as soon as we'd managed to negotiate the confusion of Skipton's market and find the right road out. Although the childcare clock was ticking against us, we had a clear three hours, minimum, before us to swap the pluses and minuses of boat ownership, or, more specifically, taking on the guardianship of *Florie*. Were we prepared to take on the mantle of one family's cherished past and make it part of our own family's future?

The concerns column was not long, but significant nevertheless. It centred around three sets of issues: the engine, the paintwork and the responsibility. Each was capable of being rationalised away, but taken together did they constitute enough to swing a decision?

To take them in order, the engine was clearly not the most modern available, but neither was it a museum piece. At some point it might need replacing, but on the other hand it could go on for years. Only time would tell, but at least we were aware of the risks. The paintwork was more straightforward. The previous owner had been an engineer, and clearly disapproved of fripples such as decoration. For us, however, the opportunity of making our contribution to the picture postcard image of the canals by adding a few splashes of colour was part of the attraction. This could easily be solved, but would take time and, undoubtedly, money. The dull blood clot red and mucus green would have to go. Altogether too visceral.

The third set of issues was the most uncertain. It had been years since either of us had even owned our own car, let alone a boat, so the burdens of maintenance, of the constant nagging thoughts that there was always something we should be doing of a weekend, were habits we had both lost. Would we find ourselves repeatedly writing cheques with not enough time to get any pleasure out of the recipient of all this cash and attention? It was possible, but even this we were able to reason away. If the worst came to the worst, we argued, we could always sell her.

The plus column was less tangible, and had more to do with gut feeling. Both being optimists, we found it hard to reject the dream which had caused us to undertake a night on five-hundred-mile round trip in the first place. We agreed that the old girl had a

certain charm, but it went deeper than that. Looking back, there was evidence that we'd both always had an attachment to the idea of owning a boat. We had even gone to numerous regattas and boat shows simply to satiate this desire, without having any intention of ever knowingly consummating it. The opportunity to take on *Florie* had come about through a series of unusual circumstances, and perhaps, we reasoned, sometimes in life you're simply forced to take, rather than make, decisions. Fate might have been slightly too strong a word for it, but it was close.

There was of course another concern and one that had been burrowing away in the back of my mind since the opportunity had first surfaced. How the hell were we to get her down from the wilds of North Yorkshire to the sedate flatlands of Oxfordshire, where we'd need to moor her? How would she take to being dragged from her homeland, which I doubted she'd ever left, and made to live 'down south'? If she was anything like any of her fellow Yorkshire folk, I suspected her reaction would be one of initial resistance, followed by sheer bloody-mindedness about her new surroundings, constantly comparing and finding fault. Could I stand it? Annette shared my concerns about the practicalities of the journey, but was less prejudiced about the boat's origins. For her, given her northern upbringing, I suspected the Yorkshire connection was in fact a plus point.

Taking everything into consideration, we'd effectively made up our minds, in principle at least, before we reached Sheffield. We would make an offer the next day. The issue of how to bring the boat down remained unresolved, however. Given our concerns, and the backstop position of a sale if things didn't work out, the obvious answer was to engage upon a courtship prior to a full commitment. I, of course, had some time on my hands and the promise of summer was stretching out before us. One option would be for me to use that time to good effect and bring her down myself. The thought lodged in my brain and began to germinate.

I would need help, of course. Controlling forty-four feet of narrowboat as well as operating swing bridges and locks, not to mention the dreaded pump-out stations, on my own was not an attractive prospect. In fact it was bloody stupid according to John,

to whom I'd floated the idea. More attractive was meeting these challenges accompanied by a combination of family and friends acting as crew, people whose company was usually sampled only at set piece events or hurried weekends, and performing the journey in a series of short to middling bursts over a couple of months.

Once we had resolved the practicalities, the final pieces of the jigsaw, less easy to explain but important nevertheless, began to slot into place. These had been buzzing round my mind for a while, a series of unconnected thoughts that predated the opportunity to buy *Florie*. Put together they seemed to offer a set of questions which I thought it was probably worthwhile trying to answer. I was reminded of the first of these as we cruised along the motorway, the milometer silently sanding down the distance between us and home. The predictable flowing movement of the three-lane highway heading south offered an inviting prospect of progress, albeit at the price of boredom. Three dead hours stretched before us and the comforts of home.

As the car accelerated effortlessly, doing what it was designed to do, it occurred to me, not for the first time, that this was what travel in Britain had become. Centres of population had become important less for their intrinsic value and the differences they offered than as staging posts between a starting point and a destination.

Motorway service stations had taken on the aura of watering holes, offering exactly the same range of adequate amenities and fast foods, and visited by many more people than the towns some were named after. Indeed, many had assumed a notoriety greater than their namesakes such as Keele (home of a fine university), Newport Pagnell (more or less subsumed by Milton Keynes) and, of course, the infamous Watford Gap, named for the Northamptonshire Watford rather than its more famous cousin (home to a fine football team), which for many marked the border between north and south. The motorways had become the new railways, minus the charm and companionship. Simple conduits for busy isolated people who no longer travelled in the true sense of the word, but moved.

Indeed, the meaning of travel had changed, becoming

synonymous with necessary movement; its benchmark of success being how quickly it could be got over with. It was something you did because you had to, rather than for its own sake, its purpose the destination rather than the journey. Gone were the days of the Sunday drive; the idea of a gentle roll out had become a thought entertained only by the masochist or the terminally insane. Whilst I agreed with the view that travel is primarily a state of mind, an emotional as much as a physical experience this nirvana had become a luxury open only to the privileged few. Could *Florie* be our passport to join that elite?

The modern view of travel, with its predetermination and single-mindedness, had allowed fresh phenomena to emerge, none of them pretty. These included road rage, the breakdown of lane discipline on motorways (unknown when I'd learnt to drive twenty years before) and a general disregard for, and disinterest in, fellow travellers, which at times seemed to border upon contempt. Far from being the exception, each of these phenomena seemed to have become the norm, almost *de rigueur*.

Not that I was without fault, in fact I was as guilty as the next man, and this had been one of the thoughts troubling me. Even as these contemplations absorbed some of the attention I should have been applying to the road I was becoming exasperated by yet another set of roadworks and the prospect of having to slow to a mere fifty miles per hour. This was going to add a full five minutes to my journey time – nothing less than a disaster! The canals, with their maximum speed of four miles an hour, seemed to offer an antidote to all this rushing around. But was this enough? After all, there was the surely more serious business of earning a living to be got on with, with no idea as to how this was going to be achieved. Luckily, before doubt had a chance to begin to set, other thoughts rushed in to shore up my shaky defences.

I returned to the theme of different towns and places, what made them what they were and what made them different from each other. It had become fashionable to suggest that trends in retailing, work and social activities had had a general homogenising effect upon us. If you were dropped blindfolded into any community in England, it might take some time to work out where you were. Schools operated to the same curriculum and

young boys and girls supported football teams hundreds of miles from their home, teams which they would never see play. High streets sported the same fascias and the pubs all looked the same and served the same beers.

Local cheeses, breads and even accents had been massaged out of the system. According to this theory, regionalism had fallen foul of greater mobility of labour, instant communications technology, the need to establish national markets and the greater insularity of people's lives. Only exceptionally did communities come together any more. It didn't seem that long ago that the Queen's silver jubilee had spawned a series of spontaneous street parties and a general feeling of self-worth as a nation. It was difficult to see this happening for her golden jubilee three years hence. Although no royalist I regretted this as much for what it said about us as a people, and about the environments we had allowed to develop around us as a kind of self-protecting, inward-looking cocoon. Rather than street parties I saw barbecues in back gardens and people using the inevitable bank holiday flicking through a multiplicity of equally poor TV channels or catching up on the DIY, anything it seemed to avoid interaction with their fellow human beings.

Once again, I was no paragon of virtue and was equally guilty of being seduced by the ephemeral comfort, materialism and, ultimately, the shallowness of it all. And yet here we were being presented with a chance to pause, to look around and see if there was any hope. Bringing *Floirrie* through the canal system offered this opportunity, and I wanted to take it.

Even as these thoughts began to crystallise, I was aware of the likely reactions I could expect from those who knew me. Some would point to my having recently turned forty and shake their head ruefully, worrying about the impact such a break might have on my pension arrangements. The words 'midlife crisis' echoed inside my head. Others would mutter 'lucky sod', point at the healthy redundancy cheque coming to me after less than a year in a new job and might say something about a classic case of being in the right place at the right time. But to be perfectly honest, and perhaps this was a symptom of the wider problem I was diagnosing, I didn't much care what other people thought.

The clincher was the canals themselves and what they represented. I had long harboured a dream of walking from John o'Groat's to Land's End, but the idea had been filed away under 'retirement projects' and never seriously investigated. The attraction of this had been to get under the skin of what made our nation what it was, to connect with some of the ingredients which made up different regions and answer some of the questions that were now rising to the surface through these ruminations.

The problem was, walking was such bloody hard work, and a project of that scale was pretty daunting, even for someone of my relatively tender years. Travelling from the northernmost tip of the main body of the English canal system, close to its southernmost point, offered the same potential rewards with considerably less effort. What was more, it was available now, when we were young and (relatively) fit, not that either of us had any illusions about the scale of the task ahead and how exhausting it might be. Given the speeds involved it would be like walking – but on water.

The canals had been the industrial arteries of England. Over two thousand miles of navigable waterways remained from the marvel of British ingenuity that had made the migration from the land into the towns possible. From their beginning, the narrow-boats had brought the food to feed the burgeoning urban population, and then, in time, they had carried the raw materials to sustain the glowing fire of the industrial revolution. The canals had, in many ways, watered the roots of what made modern-day Britain. Even the briefest of study of a map of them suggested an intricate web gripping the edges of our island at its key points, London, Liverpool, Bristol and Hull, supplying the tension which pulled the nation together.

By using the canals as my guide I could drift stealthily (well, as stealthily as the Lister engine would allow) into the backyards of different communities and peep over the fence to see what was going on. Was the life force still flowing down these channels, or were we, as a country, spiritually and physically wasting away? I didn't know, and part of the point of this exercise would be to gather some evidence.

A list of the canals I would need to use alone hinted at the

potential: the Leeds and Liverpool, the Bridgewater, the Trent and Mersey, the Coventry and the Oxford. Equally, a list of the places I would go through suggested either greatness and vibrancy or faded grandeur and depression, depending upon your point of view and prejudices. Places like Blackburn, Wigan, Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent, Birmingham and Coventry. To not only go to these places, places I would otherwise have needed a reason to visit, but also to stop and stare, to wander and gather information and finally to make up my own mind: these were my reasons for the journey.

That my subject was England was relevant too. During the week we first saw *Florie* the Scots and Welsh had voted in their new parliaments and campaigning had begun (albeit with a whimper rather than a bang) for elections to the European Assembly. What did it mean to be English any more? Were the external forces acting upon us having the effect of accentuating or denying our difference? Did enough defining characteristics survive, and if so were they thriving? I knew my sample would be selective, my analysis personal and entirely qualitative. But as the industrial age gave way to the information age, it seemed a reasonable quest to tap into the country's psyche and see how it was coping. Anyway, the trip was not intended to be a scientific experiment, more of a prolonged bout of personal nosiness.

This then was my thesis, the justification for spending the best part of the summer accompanied by the steady chug of a diesel engine, a sound that I was already beginning to feel nostalgic for. We were both able to recognise it as just that, a justification, for if we were being totally honest the decision had been made some time before, we just hadn't known it.

We both wanted to slow down, do something different, find a way of earning a living and raising a family which didn't simply 'go with the flow'. The redundancy cheque gave us the opportunity; we'd have been mad to ignore it. These were the ideas we'd fallen in love with and had nurtured the days before trekking to Skipton. *Florie* was simply the vehicle, quite literally, by which we hoped to achieve them.

Most of all, we were in the market for some fun. The previous

few months had been a tiresome battle against the body corporate and I was exhausted. Like *Florie* after her winter lay-up I needed to recharge my batteries, both intellectual and physical. This final rationalisation was probably the most selfish, but also the most important of the lot. Naturally, therefore, it was the last to be chalked up on the list.

All these thoughts can be put down on paper now, but at the time we slept on it and spoke briefly the next day about next steps before I dashed out to help run a fun day for the local Beaver Scouts with my youngest son. The realities of herding a group of fifteen eager six- and seven-year-old boys through a programme of sports and set events had focused my mind wonderfully. When I got home therefore, tired and ready for a reviving G&T, I was a little bit fazed by Annette's nervous expression and announcement that 'the deed has been done'.

We were the proud owners of forty-four feet of narrowboat. All that needed to be done now was to arrange the licence, fix the insurance, negotiate some permanent moorings, organise the finance, buy extra cutlery, bedding...